

Profile of the President

Amitai Etzioni: The Active Sociologist

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Amitai Etzioni does not share the academic sociologists' typical reticence about taking an active role in the processes of societal change he studies. Indeed, in a professional career spanning nearly four decades and covering a broad range of topics and research questions, the common thread running through Amitai Etzioni's life work as a sociologist has been to connect the theories and empirical findings of academic research (of others as well as his own) to policy making, and to engage the citizenry at large. Amitai's quest to both strengthen sociology and bring it out of the Ivory Tower into the real world has taken many forms: from teach-ins to television appearances; from columns in the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to literally hundreds of articles contributed to places where the voice of academic sociologists is seldom heard. Through these varied channels Amitai has succeeded in reaching a vast audience of people who know little and--sometimes, we fear--care less about the work sociologists do. Amitai's efforts to reach out beyond the ranks of the sociological profession have not so much popularized sociology, at least in the pejorative sense, as they have communicated its importance and potential usefulness to the world at large. In a similar vein, Amitai's stint as a senior policy advisor in the Carter White House is one of the rare occasions in American history when a bona fide sociologist has been able to join these ranks. The complete list of Amitai's many and varied activities aimed at connecting sociology as an academic discipline to the problems facing the society goes on and on--much like his seemingly boundless energy.

For a most public of sociologists, Amitai remains essentially a private person. He very rarely talks about himself and will deflect questions about his achievements to discussions of intellectual ideas, policy proposals, theoretical arguments, and criticisms. You will not find him partaking of the typical academic gossip. Still, the simple known facts of Amitai's biography hint at the extraordinary elements of his remarkable career. Born in Köln, Germany in 1929, he fled to Israel in the 1930s. He fought in the Israeli war of independence. His first book, published in Hebrew in 1952 and entitled *A Diary of a Commando Soldier*, is the first of his many writings exploring peaceful alternatives to violence as a means of conflict resolution. Amitai subsequently earned his BA and MA degrees from The Hebrew University, Jerusalem. In 1957 he moved on to the University of California-Berkeley, where he completed his PhD in the record time of 18 months (a feat that was still well-known and discussed with awe by graduate students when I was there in the 1970s). From 1958 to 1980, he served on the faculty at Columbia University, moving rapidly through the ranks from instructor to full professor. During this time, he held a variety of posts, including Director of the Center for Policy Research (which he founded in 1968 and still

directs), Associate Director of the Bureau of Applied Research, and chair of the Sociology Department. (During his term as a chair, the first woman ever to gain tenure in an Ivy League sociology department was appointed). The late 1970s marked the beginning of Amitai's career in Washington, DC. From 1978-79 he was a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution, moving over to the Carter administration as a senior policy advisor to the White House from 1979-1980. In 1980, he was named the first University Professor of George Washington University, the post he currently occupies.

Amitai has received too many honors and awards over the years to list in full, so a few highlights will have to suffice: fellowships at both the Social Science Research Council (1960-61) and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1965-66), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1968-69), appointment as a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1978-), the Lester F. Ward Distinguished Contributions Award in Applied Sociology (1987), the Ninth Annual Jeffrey Pressman Award (Policy Studies Association, 1991), and four honorary doctoral degrees. From 1987-89 he was invited to serve in the Thomas Henry Carroll Ford Foundation visiting chair at Harvard Business School, a chair previously occupied by George Homans and Ray Bauer. Here he taught ethics and launched socio-economics as a new discipline.

As anyone even with casual knowledge of the sociological literature knows, Amitai's scholarly production has been prodigious (14 books to date; 232 articles and book chapters). His scholarship has contributed centrally to the development of several sub-areas within the discipline. His early work on organizational theory has played a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary field of study. (Few know that up to the publication of his books, the term "organizational sociology" was rarely used and the concept was underdeveloped; "industrial" sociology was the governing term). *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations* was one of the ten most often cited books from 1969 to 1977. A revised edition cites several hundred studies based on his theory. *Modern Organizations* has been translated into 16 languages, and although first published in 1964, it is still widely used. The compliance theory he advanced in these works has been picked up by literally hundreds of other students of organizational theory. Some have tested pieces of the theory; some have expanded and elaborated upon it; and others have challenged it; but few students of organizations have not derived intellectual benefit from it.

That the roles of scholar and activist have complemented one another in Amitai's career finds independent support in two studies of journal citations conducted in the 1980s. The first, published in *Current Contents*, ranked him ninth among all sociologists born after 1900 in total citations in social science journals. Perhaps even more significantly, a second study published in the *Policy Studies Journal* ranked him first in total citations from 1969 to 1980 among social scientists engaged in public policy analysis.

Categorizing Amitai's work using the conventional categories of sociological theory and methodology is difficult, mainly because he has written widely, drawing from and

contributing to many different areas of study--many of which range beyond the disciplinary frontiers of sociology. He is not only a major influential contemporary contributor to scholarship in sociology, but his work is also widely known and cited in other disciplines. Taken as a whole, his work has addressed sociological units of analysis at all levels— whole societies, their constituent formal organizations, communities, and individual persons.

Never one to shy away from tackling big topics, Amitai has written extensively on both international relations (*The Hard Way to Peace*, 1962; *Winning Without War*, 1965; *Political Unification*, 1965) and the challenges to contemporary democratic politics (*Demonstration Democracy*, 1971; *An Immodest Agenda*, 1983; and *Capital Corruption*, 1984). These works have been well-received and widely cited in political science and policy studies. In the modern sociological classic that Etzioni considers his most important sociological work, *The Active Society* (1968), he extends the analysis of effective government to the broader theoretical question of how and under what circumstances society can transform itself. In this context, he examines the respective roles of societal knowledge, strategy and decision making, consensus building, mobilization, coalition building, and basic human needs. Perhaps more than any of his early writings, *The Active Society* demonstrates Amitai's ability to weave together rich and complex social theory (in this case, of macro-sopic social action) with the more universally accessible message that the people's lives could be much improved by the systematic application of sociological theory and method to deliberate societal change.

Many in the sociological community have applauded and actively supported Etzioni's efforts to move sociology out of the cloisters of academe into the world of politics, policy, and social reform. Others have regarded these efforts with skepticism or sometimes outright hostility. For some, the concerns have centered on the tension between the imperatives of pure scholarship and the often conflicted role of the activist. Others have objected to a specific proposal for reform Amitai has espoused. Some, I suspect, are simply jealous of the public attention that he has achieved in the mass media as our discipline's most active participant in the public debate—and, in the process, becoming American sociology's most widely recognized representative to the world outside the academy. Those who have had the opportunity to interact with Amitai and observe his efforts first hand know that he is driven by twin goals: he strives both to expand knowledge about how society works and to use this knowledge to improve the quality of social life, whether at the level of persons, communities, nations, or the world. For Amitai this twofold agenda--"passion" might be a more apt term—does not constitute a bifurcation of his interests and energy; instead it has been both a logical and moral imperative to press sociological knowledge into the service of the wider public good. (His catch line for socio-economics is typical: "better economics for a better society.")

Amitai's concern with the moral implications of guided change is apparent in much of his earlier work. For example, he explores the implications of bio-technological

developments for members of society and their communities in *Genetic Fix*, published in 1973 and nominated for the National Book Award. In the 1980s, he turned his attention to the theoretical and moral underpinnings of economic behavior, building a compelling case that the behavior of individuals, firms, and markets can only be adequately understood when sociological variables, broadly constructed, are added to the models economists typically use. *The Moral Dimension*, published in 1988, stands out as the most thorough and convincing critique to date of the behavioral and moral assumptions of neoclassical economics and its various rational choice derivatives in the other social sciences. Amitai's suggestion for another approach, which he describes as socio-economics," focuses not only on the theoretical and empirical shortcomings of narrowly constructed rational choice models, but also on their moral inadequacy Here the worlds of social theory and social reality meet head on: "Show me a society in which people really behave as if pleasure and self-interest were the governing motivations," he argues in effect, "and I will show you a fundamentally flawed society." Many others representing diverse academic disciplines have joined in support of Amitai's effort to rescue the study of economic behavior from the narrow assumptions of the neoclassical paradigm. The Society for the Advancement of SocioEconomics, which Amitai founded in 1989 and served as president from 1989-90, has since grown into an established organization of about 1,800 members in over 40 countries.

The concern with moral values has emerged even more prominently in Amitai's most recent work on communitarianism. His writings and related activities in this area have elaborated and explored in greater breadth and depth questions of changing public and private morality the social consequences of these changes, and the different ideologies that have arisen in response. The communitarian agenda, which includes the founding of a new journal (*The Responsive Community*), a social movement (the Communitarian Network), and a best-selling book (*The Spirit of Community*, 1993) is the current focus of Amitai's energy and attention. Perhaps more than anything else he has written or done, Amitai's work on behalf of communitarianism has generated controversy both within and outside of sociology

The reasons for controversy are not hard to understand. In launching the communitarian movement and serving as its leading theoretician, Amitai has attempted to chart a new course in American social politics, one that engages the moral agenda of the political right (but eschews its reactionary stance and authoritarian prescriptions), addresses libertarian concerns for the freedom and rights of individuals (but not their single-minded insistence of the individual above all else), and seeks to further traditional liberal goals for a more equal and humane society (but not the liberals' tendency to excuse people of responsibility for the consequences of their actions). The linking of rights to responsibilities and the attempt to strike a balance between individual and community represent fundamental strains within all human societies. In attempting to integrate these conflicting elements in the contemporary American context, communitarianism has been all too often mischaracterized and misunderstood. Proponents of existing political, social, religious, and other ideologies are eager to endorse one part of the communitarian

analysis but they reject the other parts. So when Amitai talks about the need to support the family conservatives of various stripes cheer; but when he goes on to say that in doing so we must be prepared to provide opportunities for parents--men and women equally--to take off from work to care for their infants, the same conservatives object. Traditional liberals, of course, have the opposite reaction: they applaud the idea of parental leave and equal treatment of men and women, but are troubled by the communitarian contention that on average two-parent families are best for children. The task faced by communitarianism in breaking the gridlock that afflicts the debate is enormously difficult, not only in family policy but across the range of contemporary social problems and public policies. Yet Amitai is neither daunted by the magnitude of the challenge nor pessimistic about the prospects of eventual success. Judging by the frenetic pace of his public lectures, media interviews, and writings, he shows no intention of slowing down.

The past decade has not been an easy one for sociology. The discipline has come under political attack and departments have been threatened with cutbacks and, in some well-publicized cases, elimination. Still the problems confronting us as a discipline and profession are small relative to the problems facing the nation and the world. We are, therefore, most fortunate to have Amitai Etzioni as president of the ASA. His visibility and credibility outside of sociology; his reputation not only among sociologists, and not only in academia; and most of all the insight, energy, resourcefulness, and courage that have guided his career and life to date all augur well for the leadership of our profession for the next year and beyond.